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Painting Money

Gracie Hadland talks to Paul Sietsema about his recent exhibition at Matthew Marks Gallery.

By Gracie Hadland • April 20, 2025

PAUL SIETSEMA'S PAINTINGS often lead with something so obvious—a punch line or visual pun—that it makes you wonder: Am I stupid, or is he? In his series of Carriage *paintings, he covers other artists' paintings that he bought for cheap at auction—with renderings of ripped bills in foreign currency. The paintings are literally, then, money wasted (ha ha), while the monetary value of the original is voided by Sietsema's overpainting. But with another look, the elegant opacity of the enamel surfaces muffles the punch line. The works have a layered effect; the cool, glassy sheen of the surfaces create a trompe l'oeil, luring you in and making you wonder if you're actually both smart. Sietsema's work depends on this oscillation between sophisticated appearance and punchy humor, leaving the viewer somewhere in between.*

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In the artist's most recent show, this past fall at Matthew Marks in Los Angeles, Sietsema presented 14 new paintings, most of which are continuations of series he has been working in for years. In addition to torn money, there are rotary phones and coins built up with paint. Sietsema is an artist preoccupied with the perennial problems of painting. Is it dead? Is it just a pretty, market-friendly object? He seeks answers through repetition, returning again and again to these series marked by minor variations on narrowly defined visual themes. He often shows them together: it's as if each new series must be accompanied by the last to exhaust its function. Among the phones and money paintings at the Matthew Marks exhibition was one from a new series, featuring objects in metallic tone enamel. This piece, Arrangement (2024), is a picture of a broken record: perhaps a subtle nod to the artist's own obsessiveness.

I visited Paul's studio in December where we discussed his work, surrounded by piles of paper and postcards and foreign notes.

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GRACIE HADLAND: Some artists are set on being opaque—avoiding speaking about their work too much or not wanting to personally appear in their work or around it. You've given lectures where, instead of talking about the work, you show a film. I'm wondering, what does that gesture of opacity as an artist mean to you? And is it important for you to be sort of cryptic or opaque in your self-presentation as an artist?

PAUL SIETSEMA: I'm not trying to be cryptic or opaque at all. I get stage fright about public speaking, and I don't want to be in front of people giving a lecture. So I'll think of ways not to be in front of people; I'll show a film of mine instead. It's also that I feel like that's the way that my brain organizes itself. I think making things visually and speaking or writing are totally different. I'm deep into visual stuff, which makes it harder for me to organize my thoughts in writing. It's that I don't really trust what I have to say about the work, and I feel like, a lot of the time, it leads people astray. I'm interested in how objects exist in the world. Not all objects emanate or communicate that much, so I like the things that I make to be one among those other things in the world. They shouldn't be louder than something else.

This fall you had a show at Matthew Marks in Los Angeles in which you exhibited works from different series of paintings. One series consists of what you call *Carriage* paintings, which incorporate different types of currency painted on the canvas. These are paintings of money that themselves become financial assets. They seem to me to directly address the idea that paintings exist primarily as financial assets, but your works seem to obscure a potential critique of a market-crazed art world.

Yes, I mean they either do or they don't [become an asset]. It's not up to me. But I think that this does maybe have something to do with the way that I feel like my work functions, maybe a little related to opacity—I do like if there's a grand gesture that is maybe kind of dumb, and I always think of it as a red herring. Something that sort of slaps you in the face, and then if you can regain your vision and everything, [you realize] that's not really the point, that there are other things happening.

Also, I collected currency as a kid. The American dollar almost looks like it was hand-drawn in ink. I was always amazed by the beauty, but I also loved that it had this sort of triple value: its aesthetic beauty, the monetary value, and then the fact that it was like this multiple that many people had access to in various

stages of circulation. It seemed like this beautiful thing that was like an artwork that had a wide existence, being used by people all the time. When I started making these paintings, I was still interested in that matrix that I experienced when I was a kid. Then I was in a position to put these in play, in a situation in which the painting either had value or didn't; it was handmade, it would maybe be in a series—like, there were just parallels to it in the weird economy that I was spinning them into. But I do find the currency very beautiful, and, of course, tearing money is a thrill. I tear the bills to make the paintings. And that's great, because it's like if I could afford to buy a really nice car and then drive it into a wall; I think that would be pretty exciting.

There's another element to these Carriage paintings too, in that they are painting over paintings made by other people, right? Could you talk a little bit about that?

I realized, when I started traveling around and looking at things and going on eBay in the late 1990s, and looking at other weird auction aggregators since then, that there are just hundreds of thousands of paintings—probably more—probably millions of paintings for sale at all times from different people in the world. And so, as a game, I started bidding on some paintings. I started choosing them intuitively, based on my own network of understanding of painting. And so I started putting in low bids, bottom-feeder bids, like 50 euros on a painting, and if I would win it, I would have shippers pick it up and then wait for others to join it, and then have them shipped to me. It was a strange way of collecting art but it didn't really cost anything. The artists were dead, a lot of them, because the paintings were older, and the styles usually paralleled other [contemporaneous] styles. Most of these artists were unoriginal. It was interesting to me to have this sort of second or third or fourth or fifth take on style. Once I had them, they became like a trigger for whatever would happen on top of them. The idea of a blank canvas is something I'm not crazy about, and it was nice to have something to react to.

I was thinking about that too. I mean, in your studio, there's so much stuff that is made by other people that you often use as a starting point. Is that an important element in the work, that it begins with something already existing, handmade by someone else, as a sort of prompt?

I see it as doing two things. Number one, and this is how I feel about these objects, if they're sitting at an auction and, you know, out in the middle of nowhere, and nobody picks it up, it probably goes in the garbage. And I sort of like the idea that I'm picking these things up and keeping them in circulation as cultural objects—maybe not with the intention of the original maker, which is a different thing to think about, but that I'm sort of keeping this other world that somebody else started in circulation is interesting to me.

I know that the art world in general seems to like people who are true originals—people are very egotistical. You sort of have to be. It's about bravado and expression. It's sort of like neo-expressionism never died. With conceptual art, I think there's something to me that's less egotistical. I do like to disappear, and this might have to do with my sensibility, just the way that I am as a person, but I'm not super excited to be visible in the world. Like, I'm always more comfortable if people don't know I'm there somehow. And so I feel like starting with other work, or mixing with other work—or maybe the thing that I apply is just money: I don't own money, and somebody else owns the work. And it's not about my ego or expression or something. It's more like an equation of different things coming together.

That's interesting, this idea of disappearing in painting. Jack Goldstein talked about disappearing in his paintings. And most often, he was starting off with photographs, I guess.

There is something strange if you're doing work like copying a photograph or doing anything that's related to copying: it's a very meditative process, and you get lost. It becomes your life and it becomes an environment that is, if you have a certain kind of brain, something that you like to live in.

Also, there's something funny about starting with someone else's work, a painting that you bought for like 50 bucks that might end up selling for a thousand times as much. It's a bit of a joke or a prank to apply the terms of your work's value as an artist to this object by someone else that was not wanted.

They're called, yeah, *Carriage*, because a carriage in financial terms is one thing that carries the value of another. And so the idea is that these paintings have to do with a kind of applied value.

To me, there's a subtle humor in a lot of these works. There are these gotcha jokes that have a punchy, warm humor that seems to contradict the sleek, sometimes cold exterior of these objects.

I mean, humor is connected to many things, and it's a fundamental psychological, emotional, linguistic complex. It's an activating element to anything. I have always been interested in perceptual systems and I do like the way the humor plays into those.

In each series (mostly talking about the ones in this past show at Matthew Marks Gallery, September–November 2024), there are time stamps. The dates on magazines, money, credit cards, or through representations of another time, as with the rotary phones—you're often collapsing multiple eras on the surface of the canvas with these different objects.

I think it's maybe another one of these "dumb" moves to grab the viewer's attention. It's something that I like, when an artwork is supposed to embody its time period—if you just write the date on something, suddenly, the artwork doesn't have to exist anymore, because it's a place-keeper for a time period. And then aesthetics that exist in one period of time, indicated by a technological object, is another form of it. But I've also always been interested in the different types of indicators of time that exist. I like using the phones in these works because they capture this spread of time between the 1940s and now. I mean, some people still have them in their houses. When I was in high school in the late '80s, that's all we used. Then there's this, what I think of as an exploration of, slippage in time too. The thing about making artwork now is that whatever it is, if you've just finished it, it exists very strongly in the present. But if it's a magazine cover from 10 years ago, it also has that register. When I was making films in the late '90s, it had a lot to do with the sort of virtual technologies that were coming out then that, of course, now are pretty much everywhere. But it was this kind of idea of time travel or experiencing more than one time period in one object: if an artwork collapses a technique from one era, an object from another era, like a magazine, and then maybe a coin from another era, and all of that expands but they collapse one single moment.

These works have a very meticulous process that takes you a long time and has multiple steps that are not always oriented around the actual application of paint, the most important step of the process. It's more like the painting part is one element of a longer process.

Yeah. I think of them as sandwiches of paintings, of which painting is one of the layers.

Do you consider yourself a painter then?

Part of me thinks a painter is anybody that uses paint. And I think Daniel Buren was a painter. And he, in the beginning, used striped fabric, and then painted one white line on the side, and it was a painting. And then he stopped painting anything on them, but they were like panels or just pieces of fabric, or just skins of paint on a wall that were striped. So, I don't know. It really depends on your definition of "painter." I don't really care. I'm not really into categories that much. I see a lot of people who are throwing paint around in abstract ways, and their paint drips and drops in bright colors, and I don't think they're painters, because it's not relevant. So part of me thinks a painter is somebody who's making relevant artwork with paint. And if that's the case, I'm a painter. But other people have historical ideas of what a painter is.

I do use the idea of a painting as the system. There are other systems involved, but a painting as an object with its own history and existence in different forms is a system that I like to start with. I think that makes them actually deep painting, in a way, and not just painting. Because I do consider what a painting is, and I look at a lot of painting, and I always think about what a painting is or should be. But I feel like painting is so weird now, maybe because of the market or the art world, and so I would be less inclined just to say it.

In that vein, do you see these works being critical of that market or world?

I feel like you know if you do something and then you are in dialogue with other people that do that thing. I don't know if "critical" is the word. I know that I'm influenced by what's happening. I'm not going to copy what's happening, but it definitely influences what I want to say. And I have noticed that in periods where super bright painting is happening, I'll make some. I do kind of consider them like decoys. I can use these trends as camouflage a little bit, where I'm kind of going undercover. It allows me to extend the system of what I feel like I can activate if that aesthetic is in play at the same time. But critical … I mean, I have my own feelings about whether I like something or not, or whether I think something should exist in such high numbers and force the attention of the art world based on its economic weight. But in my work, I always want to make something that emanates in the way that I want it to. I don't think that the tool of my work is specific enough to be critical that way, really. I think people pick up on that when they look at the work, but it's not necessarily articulated.

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Known for his paintings, drawings, and 16 mm films that explore how imagery, form, and material affect our understanding of culture and history, Paul Sietsema (b. 1968) has had one-person exhibitions at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, the Museo Reina Sofía in Madrid, the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York, the Museum of Modern Art in New York, and the Kunsthalle Basel. He was awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship in 2005, a DAAD (German Academic Exchange Service) Fellowship in 2008, and a Wexner Center Residency Award in 2010. He lives and works in Los Angeles.

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Featured image: Paul Sietsema. Arrangements, 2024. Courtesy of the artist. Image has been cropped.